

The Experiences of Underserved Minority Battered Women

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Statement of the Research Problem

This qualitative study explored the experiences of underserved ethno/racial minority battered women and sought to understand how social structures of power and oppression shape these experiences.

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, is a leading cause of injury and death to women worldwide (Mills, 1996). In the United States approximately 1.5 million women experience domestic violence annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Although all women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic class or religion, are vulnerable to violence because of their gender, studies have indicated that minority women, particularly black women, experience higher rates and more severe intimate partner violence than their white counterparts (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; West, 2004). Yet, they are less likely to utilize and benefit from existing domestic violence services (Henning & Klesges, 2002).

In recent years it has been argued that because of their social identity, minority women face structural inequalities which may increase their susceptibility to domestic violence and create barriers to their utilization of victims' services (Andeson & Collins, 2001; Crenshaw, 1994). The combination of higher vulnerability and limited access to services place minority women at high risk and suggest a need to develop an effective response to address the problem of domestic violence in minority communities. In order to develop such response it is necessary to understand the unique realities of minority battered women and "the structural social underpinnings of these realities" (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p.38). However, because historically most existing knowledge was developed based on studies of domestic violence services recipients (Bowker, 1983; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh & Winsstok, 2000), usually mainstream women (Bent-Goodley, 2001, 2005), knowledge about minority battered women in general and those who are not clients of victims' services in particular, is limited. Furthermore, even studies that did examine the experience of minority battered women, rarely focused on the structural elements of multiple oppressions that systematically shape the lives of these women (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

This study intended to address these gaps in knowledge by seeking to gain a better understanding of the realities and needs of minority battered women who are not recipients of domestic violence services, and learn about the influence of social systems of oppression on their lives. Such understanding is anticipated to inform the development

of relevant policies and more inclusive, user friendly, supportive services to help them obtain safety and heal from the multiple traumas that they have endured.

Research Background

Public and professional understanding of domestic violence has evolved over the past 40 decades. Until the early 1970s domestic violence was perceived as a private family matter which did not warrant public discussion (Davis, 1987). The process of raising public awareness and reconstructing domestic violence as a pervasive social problem that requires social level solutions was initiated by the second wave of the feminist movement (Davis, 1978; Lehrner & Allen, 2009), which was dominated by white, middle class scholars and activists. Emphasizing the shared gender –based subordinated social position of all women and proposing that it has led to common experiences and a shared perspective about reality (Hartsock, 1985), they focused on the sociopolitical analysis of domestic violence and suggested the gender- based oppression of women in a patriarchal world as the primary explanation for the problem (Bograd 1988; Davis, 1987; Lehrner & Allen, 2009). Second wave feminists promoted the idea of a “universal risk” (Ptacek, 1999) and similarity in women’s experience of domestic violence and believed that universal gender sensitive intervention models were relevant to all women (Bograd, 1999).

During the 1990s, third wave feminists began to criticize the notion of a unilateral gender –based feminist perspective or standpoint. They have stressed the diversity within women’s experience (Davis, 1993), claiming that there are many feminist standpoints because women’s social positions and therefore their lived experience and perspectives are determined not by gender alone, but by *intersectionality*, i.e. the intersection of gender with other aspects of a woman’s social identity (Crenshaw, 1994). Thus, while all women experience gender- based oppression, some women experience additional sources of oppression such as racism, classism, and homophobia, which influence their lives. According to this Feminist Standpoints Theory, gender inequality may be one but not exclusive explanatory construct of domestic violence, because other factors, such as a woman’s racial affiliation, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, religion, class, age, disability status and sexual orientation shape her susceptibility to domestic violence, the way she experiences and responds to it and her ability to obtain safety (Bograd, 1999).

While all proponents of the feminist standpoints theory agree that intersectionality shapes the nature and meaning of women’s realities (Crenshaw, 1994, Davis, 1993), they have debated the impact of being located at the intersection of several systems of oppression. Some have emphasized the accumulative burden of simultaneously experiencing multiple oppressions (Mann & Grimes, 2001). However, others have stressed the structural aspect of oppression, arguing that the various systems of oppression are interconnected as part of one overarching *matrix of domination* that organizes power in society (Hill-Collins, 1990). The matrix of domination is structured along interlocking axes of oppression (i.e. sexism, racism, classism, homophobia) that operate together through several domains of power on three social levels, the individual level of personal biography, the group or community level and the macro level of social institutions (Hill-Collins, 1990). According to this structural perspective, because of the

interconnected nature of all systems of oppression and their tendency to operate together in a way that strengthen dominant power relations on all three social levels, their mutual impact on those who are positioned at the intersection of several sources of oppression is more than additive (Hill-Collins, 1990). Together these systems create a web of systematically interlocking barriers that exacerbate each other and can trap one among them (Frye, 1983).

Acknowledging diversity within women's experience of domestic violence, and recognizing that it is shaped by their different social positions at the intersection of various systems of oppression that operate together in a way that tends to strengthen dominant power relations, suggest that universal knowledge and a non-differential approach to programs, that were developed according to the dominant culture framework without reference to the various aspects of women's social identity, may be ineffective for minority women because of the unique nature of their experience, and can further perpetuate their marginal position and the power imbalance that they experience in their intimate relationships (Hill- Collins, 2000; Richie, 2000; West, 2004). To correct this situation and develop more inclusive, effective and empowering practice models it is important to include the voice of marginalized women in the process of knowledge production by listening to their experience, analyzing their individual stories within a broader analysis of the interlocking systems of power and oppression in order to understand how these systems have shaped their experience and incorporating their perceptions and vision of helpful interventions in the planning and design of policies and interventions (Hill-Collins 1990; Kanuha,1996).

The current study was informed by Feminist Standpoints Theory. It was guided by the structural perspective and was designed to give voice to a marginalized group of minority battered women, to gain a better understanding of their realities and to gain insight into the operation of power, particularly the processes and mechanisms through which the interrelated systems of race, class and gender based oppression operate and affect the women's experience and interpretation of domestic violence, their coping strategies and resources, help seeking behavior, and the response that they encounter when they try to seek help. Such understanding is necessary in order to develop a comprehensive culturally competent response to address the needs of minority battered women.

Methodology

Because the objectives of this study were to give voice to marginalized women, to gain understanding of their subjective abuse related experiences and to decipher how social structures shape these experiences, a qualitative method guided by the principles of feminist standpoints inquiry was used.

Feminist standpoints qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of giving priority to the everyday lived experience of marginalized women and exploring the way in which larger social and political systems shape this experience (Hill-Collins 1990), employing methodologies that facilitate consciousness raising and critical thinking of the researcher and the participants (Swigonski, 1994), treating participants with care and

respect (Opie, 1992), being explicit about the values underlining the research questions and interpretations (Swigonski, 1994) sharing the findings with the participants, and making them available to policy makers and clinicians so that they can inform and promote change of oppressive conditions (Langellier & Hall, 1989).

Based on these premises I shared with the participants my interest in the research subject, discussed my outsider stance as a white woman who is a foreigner in this country and emphasized my authentic not knowing position, which allowed them to be the experts and teach me (Berger, in press) about racism in the U.S. its interaction with sexism and poverty and their mutual impact on their lives.

The research constructs are defined as follows:

Battered woman: A woman who is, or was experiencing physical violence by a man with whom she has or had an intimate relationship. The term battered woman is used in this study interchangeably with the terms victim of domestic violence, victim of intimate partner abuse, victim of intimate partner violence, a woman who experiences domestic violence or intimate partner violence.

Intimate partner: Husband, boyfriend, fiancé, or children's father, who may or may not live with the woman.

Partner's physical violence: The use of physical force by a man against his female intimate partner or ex-partner. This force can range from pushes and slaps, to coerced sex, to assault with deadly weapons (Bograd, 1988).

Ethno/racial minority woman: A woman who is non-Caucasian and considers herself to be outside the mainstream society in terms of her national origin, racial, ethnic or cultural background (MacLeod & Shin, 1990).

Underserved woman: A woman who self-defined as a battered woman or a former battered woman, but is currently not a recipient of domestic violence victims' services. She can however be a consumer of other services such as child protective services, probation department, or public assistance.

A non-representative sample was recruited by means of two different procedures, through their prior participation in mandated anger management programs in the New York Metropolitan area and through snow ball procedure. The final sample included seventeen women. Sample size was determined by saturation, i.e. when no new information or insights about the subject were being offered by new participants (Licnoln & Guba, 1985).

All participants resided in inner city, impoverished, predominantly minority communities in the New York metropolitan area and defined their income as low. All the women self-identified as black. Seven women were of Caribbean decent, eight were African Americans and two defined themselves as half Caribbean and half African American. Two women were new immigrants. One had a temporary visitor visa which expired after she left her abusive partner and one received a permanent resident status a short time before the interviews. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 54 years old with a mean of 35.1 (SD=10.6). All participants had a high school or high school equivalent (GED) diploma. Eight women worked full time or part time at low paying jobs. Two

women were supported by a current intimate partner, six were receiving public assistance and one woman who had no income relied on a small allowance that was provided to her by the homeless shelter where she resided

All participants were physically abused by at least one intimate partner. Four women were married to the abuser. Fifteen women had at least one child with the abuser. The length of their relationship with the abuser ranged from nine months to twelve years with a mean of 5.9 (SD=3.0). At the time of the interviews all but one woman were separated from the abuser. Eleven women were separated for periods that ranged from three to twenty two years, and five women were separated for shorter periods that ranged from three weeks to ten months. All the women had children. The number of children ranged from one to six with a mean of 2.9 (SD=1.4). The ages of children ranged from eight months to twenty four years old. At the time of the interviews none of the women was a recipient of domestic violence victims' services.

In-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant at the time and place of her choice. A second interview was conducted after the initial analysis of the principle interview in order to verify my initial interpretations. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was content analyzed. Content analysis began with open coding (Berg, 2001). A code book was developed after the first interview and was refined throughout the data analysis process. Codes were clustered into categories, related categories were clustered into broader themes and finally core themes across categories were defined. Grounding the findings in direct quotes from the text, conducting a validation interview with participants and using outsider coders helped to secure credibility of the findings. Reflexivity and consulting peers helped to promote confirmability.

Findings

There were three interrelated primary findings in this study. The sense of living with constant abuse that characterized the lived experience of participants, the intense feelings of loneliness that constituted their emotional world and a duality in their self-perception of feeling simultaneously strong and unworthy.

The first finding

The first finding was the women's experience of their **immediate and extended social environment as constantly abusive**. As a result they viewed the world as an "*evil and unfair*" place and often felt trapped in this dangerous world ("*Did you hear about the haunted mansion? Do you know what it is? You walk inside and there are rooms and hallways, and signs Exit on many doors, but everywhere you turn a monster jumps at you and you're scared. That is what my life has been like*"). The sense of abuse was experienced on two general levels which were perceived as interrelated: intra-familial and extra-familial.

The sense of the **family as a source of abuse** began in early childhood with the experienced of childhood physical, sexual and emotional abuse and continued into adulthood experience of domestic violence. The primary theme that emerged relative to childhood abuse was its connection to the experience of domestic violence. The women

perceived childhood abuse as influencing both their susceptibility to domestic violence and their reaction to it. Childhood abuse was perceived as a detrimental starting point that shaped their lives and set the stage for subsequent experiences of domestic violence in adulthood. Participants felt that they made the wrong choice of partner at the wrong time because they were driven by their wish to escape their abusive parents and to fulfill emotional needs to be loved and cared for (*"I was young, I was not ready for a relationship. I just wanted to escape because of what my stepfather did to me...I wanted to be loved, to have a family"*). Their reaction to domestic violence was also perceived as shaped by the previous experience of childhood abuse. The abusive partner was initially perceived as *"caring"*, *"loving"*, *"protective"* and the relationship with him was viewed as a realization of a dream to have a family and to repair all the wrongs that they have experienced in their families of origin. When he began to abuse them, most women reported intense negative emotional reaction because the beating made them relive the early trauma of childhood abuse and was experienced as a breach of a perceived promise to correct the past, which intensified the sense of betrayal and abandonment that they experienced in childhood when their parents abused them.

When they shared their experience of domestic violence in adulthood, the women focused on four aspects, the nature of partner abuse, the process and consequences of the abuse and their self-defense strategies.

The nature of abuse: All the women experienced very severe physical violence including being beaten, kicked, burnt with cigarettes, hot oil or acid, and threatened with a knife and with a gun. Three women were also sexually abused and raped by the partner. The physical violence was always accompanied by emotional and psychological abuse that was perceived as more painful than the beating (*"He was cheating on me and beating me. It was bad. But the worst part was him putting me down and calling me names"*).

The process and consequences of partner abuse: The relationships that were initially perceived as very positive became abusive usually after the woman made a commitment to the partner by moving in with him or getting pregnant with his child. The physical violence was often triggered by the man's infidelity. The physical violence started with *"mild"* acts and quickly escalated to severe violence that caused serious physical injuries such as broken bones, burns, black eyes and loss of consciousness. In addition to the physical consequences participants reported psychological consequences which included fear for their lives, intense feelings of anger, long lasting injury to their sense of self and concerns to the psychological well-being of their children. Fear was reportedly felt only during the most severe violent incidents or when the woman was pregnant and felt she was unable to fight back. Anger was experienced by all participants as both a general floating feeling not directed at anyone specific (*"I used to be an angry person. Waking up just angry, angry angry angry. Angry at myself, at the world, at everybody"*), and as rage against the abuser that was experienced as periodic episodes of intense feelings often accompanied by fantasies about torturing and killing the partner. The injury to the sense of self was expressed as feeling lost (*"I felt less than a woman. I lost myself. I was just like nobody"*). The concern for the psychological wellbeing of the children focused on the fear that the children will continue the intergenerational cycle of trouble and abuse. The women wanted their children to have better lives than they had. They wanted to discontinue two intergenerational patterns. On one hand they wanted to

break the pattern of domestic violence and on the other hand they wanted to break the pattern of growing up without a father figure. As they considered the future of their relationship with the abuser they reportedly felt torn between the fear that their children end up in abusive intimate relationship if they stay with the abuser and that of their children growing up without a father if they leave the abuser. Both options were perceived as bad and as posing psychological threat to the children, often creating a feeling of a Catch 22 situation.

Self-defense strategies: When they described their experience of domestic violence it became apparent that participants felt a sense of agency and ability to “*deal with him*” or “*deal with it*”. They “dealt” with the abuse reportedly by using either a fight or a flight response. The fight response: Most women reported that they always fought back against the abuser. Although the abuser was stronger and they ended up being severely hurt, they continued to fight back (“*I fought back. He was stronger than me, his hits are harder than mine. But I didn’t let that take over me. I always fought back and at the end I’d always be the one hurt, and I got hurt really bad, really bad*”). Several women initiated violence when they felt the partner was about to do it (“*If you were in abusive relationships most of your life, you expect it and you become aggressive to protect yourself. You took it for a long time until you are tired, and now you are say, I am not going to wait for you to hit me. Now I will hit you*”).

The flight response: Except for one woman who claimed she never fought back because she was afraid that if she did she would not be able to stop, so she tried to leave the house when arguments escalated, none of the women used actual flight during fights as a measure of self-defense. However they fled psychology, reportedly only during very severe violent incident, by feeling “*numb*” or detached.

Extra familial abuse. The women felt abused by their external environment, which was often perceived as more abusive than their families. Three sources of extra familial abuse were identified: the informal community, formal social agencies such as child protective services, the police, schools, shelters and social services, and broader hostile social conditions of racism, poverty and sexism.

The informal community. The women described their communities as violent and dangerous, infested by drug dealing in the streets, gang activities, gunshots, killings, rape, and brutal police activities. Although they experienced their communities as scary places where every outing carries the risk of either becoming a victim of crime or a witness to it, participants felt that they have learned to cope with community violence using either avoidance (“*I am afraid, I don’t want to get in trouble, every little thing can get you in trouble, so I stay home, I stay to myself, when I hear people talking or arguing near my building I close all the windows and stay away from the windows*”), or confrontation (“*In my neighborhood people got raped and murdered. I think I wasn’t because no one wanted to mess with me. I used to fight. I am a fighter, if you come at me I am ready. People know I am fighting so they don’t want to mess with me*”). While the women felt that they have learned to protect themselves against community violence they expressed concerns for the safety of their children who were perceived as inexperienced and naïve thus, more vulnerable to community violence.

Formal social agencies. The formal social institutions that participants encountered in their daily lives as well as social services and organizations that they encountered when they tried to seek help for the domestic violence were experienced by them as oppressive and abusive. While the women expressed a sense of agency and competence when they discussed coping with their abusive partner and violent communities (*"I know how to deal with it"*), they often felt powerless in their interactions with formal institutions (*"When you are dealing with the system everybody gets involved and you are at the mercy of these people"*).

The Administration for Children Services (ACS) was perceived as the most powerful and abusive formal institution that either actually or potentially violated the women's sense of bonding with their children and their identities as mothers. Due to mandated reporting laws and because failure to protect children from exposure to domestic violence can be considered maltreatment (Bragg, 2003), the fear of being reported to ACS often deterred the women from seeking help (*"They can call ACS on you"*).

The police which was perceived as brutal, abusive and life threatening to black men was experienced as dangerous to the black women in this study as well. The fear of the police was identified on four levels: fear of being reported by the police to ACS, fear of being arrested due to dual or retaliatory arrest, fear of deportation and fear of exposure to retaliatory violence by the abusive partner due to ineffective police intervention.

Schools were perceived threatening because due to their children behavioral or academic difficulties participants were frequently called and invited to school. That created a lot of anxiety that was experienced as related to concerns for the child's educational future, fear of being judged, blamed for the child problems, and labeled as a bad mother, and a related fear to be reported by the school to ACS.

Domestic violence and homeless shelters. When they tried to leave the abuser, due to lack of resources most women turned to shelters. Five women ended in domestic violence shelters and ten in homeless shelters. There was no difference in the perception of the shelter between the two groups. When they described the shelter experience the women used metaphors such as *"jail"*, *"prison"*, *"boot camp"*, *"military school"*, *"hell"*. The policies and practices of shelters were experienced as oppressive, intrusive, violating the women's sense of esteem and rights for privacy and self-determination. Participants reported feeling *"degraded"* and *"humiliated"* by shelter workers. They felt *"exposed"* by workers intrusive questions. Furthermore, they complained that workers breached confidentiality and *"would tell everybody"* what women told them in private. Their space was violated by frequent unannounced home inspection visits that took place when the women were not home. They felt that they were stripped of the right to self-determination because *"it was all about following the rules"*. They did not have time for themselves or for their children because they were *"rushed"* to meetings and numerous mandated programs and were *"pushed to get your act together and leave the shelter"*. The women complained that workers were insensitive, disrespectful and judgmental. They did not offer emotional support or therapy to the women or the children. However the women were mandated to attend daily "support" groups. These groups focused on the subject of domestic violence and created a lot of anxiety and resentment because the women did not trust other women and did not want to share their personal experience

with them and also felt that the agenda of group meetings was dictated by the worker and was not relevant or helpful to them.

Public assistance was also perceived as oppressive and punitive system, which like the shelters, violated their rights for privacy and self-determination, although to a lesser degree, but mostly judged and shamed them.

Hostile social conditions. Participants felt that because of their racial affiliation, social class and gender identity, they were exposed to racism, poverty and sexism. Racism poverty and sexism were perceived as interrelated, mutually affecting each other and interacting together in a circular way which facilitated the exposure of participants to all the other sources of abuse.

Racism was experienced as a painful reality of existing on the margin of a “hateful” world that treats them as inferior (“*To me...the color of my skin...it is like we blacks have no rights, our voice is not heard. It’s like you never had authority so you are never going to get authority...we black people got to go through so much...this is something that has been embedded in us...it’s there...it’s just reality...it’s a lot of pain*”). Being black was perceived as shaping the women’s overall lived experience (“*when we blacks talk among ourselves about bad things that happened in our lives we always say this wouldn’t have happened to us if we were white*”). Participants felt that racism increases their susceptibility to domestic violence (“*A lot of black men due to racism are not able to support their families...there are many obstacles that black men face...a lot of black men get frustrated and they will beat you...the abuse that African American women go through is indirectly because of racism*”). Racism was perceived as directly related to poverty and to a lack of personal and family resources, which limited the woman’s options and forced her to stay longer in the abusive relationships or to turn to social institutions for help. However, fears to encounter racism often deterred them from seeking help, particularly from the police, which was perceived as hostile toward the black community, and the women stated that they preferred not to call them unless the situation was “*really drastic*”. When they did turn to social institutions, participants often felt that they encountered discrimination and stigmatization and believed that racism affected both their access to services and the quality of service that they have received.

Poverty was perceived as a direct result of racial discrimination and stigmatization and was experience as lack of money to support the woman and her children and a lack of affordable housing. Although most participants reported not having enough money to support themselves and their children they still felt that somehow they were able to find a way to secure money to survive, whereas the major problem was the perceived inability to afford a place to live. This often left them feeling trapped between violence and homelessness, and forced them to turn to shelters when they decided to leave the abuser. Most women ended up in homeless shelters either due to lack of space in domestic violence shelters, or because they did not want to disclose the fact that they were abused (“*I didn’t want anybody in my business*”). The findings indicated that women who are at imminent and high risk may be denied by domestic violence shelters because these shelters are often filled, sometimes by battered women who are not facing imminent lethality danger, but lack suitable housing solutions, and whose over-stay leads to denial of safe shelter solutions for those who are at serious risk.

Sexism was experienced on two levels, the lower social status of women and the unequal distribution of burden between women and men. Both issues were perceived as intersecting with racism and poverty. Participants felt that while historically all women have been ascribed lower status than men (*“our elderly said that women are secondary to men”*), black women have been considered lower than white women by being portrayed as less beautiful, *“lazy”*, *“aggressive”* and promiscuous. Relative to the unequal distribution of burden, several participants attributed it to sexism (*“I feel like even as women, we might not have all the same experiences but I think like being a woman is hard period...we go through a lot of things we have to carry all the weight, and men...they got it so easy, they can just walk away from things”*), while others felt it was shaped by racism and poverty (*“a white man is more likely to get a job and to have money so he is more apt to marry a woman and stay and support her”*).

The second finding

The profound loneliness that constituted the women's emotional world was reflected in direct expressions such as *“I am alone”*, *“I have no one”* that were repeated several times in every interview. It was also suggested by the fact that all the women identified the need *“to have someone to talk to, someone who will make me feel that I am not alone”*, as their primary need. The loneliness characterized the experience of the women since before they disclosed the abuse and throughout seeking help related to the abuse.

Feeling alone before disclosing the abuse. The experience of childhood abuse left participants feeling abandoned and lonely. They entered the relationship with their partner expecting that his love will resolve these feelings. At the beginning of the relationship he was perceived as meeting these needs. When he became abusive they experienced abandonment and felt alone again. These feelings were amplified because initially they concealed the abuse, thus denying themselves the opportunity to ease the loneliness by sharing their pain and receiving emotional support. Loneliness relative to delayed disclosure was associated with four emotions which emerged as hindering disclosure and help seeking, shame, hope that the abuser will change, distrust of others, and fear of the consequences of disclosure.

Shame was related to a discrepancy between their desire to be respected by others, versus the belief that battered women are perceived as *“weak”* or *“stupid”*. Participants were reluctant to be perceived as the latter and preferred to hide the abuse. The shame was perceived to be shaped by gender and racial stereotypes which portray black women as strong and battered women as weak (*“Because for black women, we believe that we suppose to be strong and not just be weak and just let men walk all over us, I think like...our pride gets the best of us”*). In a paradoxical way, the public campaign against domestic violence that was designed to help battered women by raising awareness to the problem and to existing resources, reinforced feelings of shame, because being in abusive relationship when popular opinion seems to be that women should and can leave intensified the fear to be perceived as stupid for staying (*“Everywhere you go you see signs about domestic violence and numbers of hotlines and you feel ashamed, you feel that people will look down at you because you are staying when there is so much help out there”*).

Hope that the abuser will change. Participants entered the relationship with their partner believing that they finally found sanctuary from the abuse that they endured in their families of origin and realized their dream to be a part of a happy family. When the partner began to abuse them, it was hard for them to give up the dream and accept the new reality and they held on to the hope that he will change to what he appeared to be before.

Distrust of others. Distrusting all others was one of the main deterrents from disclosing the abuse. It was experienced as related to shame and distinctive to black women who were perceived to be surrounded by untrustworthy, hostile immediate and extended social environment (*“Black women tend to hold a lot inside because we are ashamed, we don’t want people to know, you can’t trust people, you don’t want people to know that your man is beating you because you are afraid that they will use it against you...they will look at you differently”*). The professional literature acknowledges distrust of formal services as characterizing the experience of black battered women (Nash, 2005). However, extended family, communal sharing and informal networks of support within the black community were cited as a protective factor for black women (Fry& Barker, 2002). The experience of the women who participated in this study has been different. Participants experienced their families and communities as divided, competitive, and filled with hate, jealousy and gossip; betrayal and schadenfreude (i.e. delight in another’s misfortune). Family, friends, neighbors and other women were perceived by all participants as untrustworthy (*“you don’t talk to people or try to make friends because the next thing you know they will have sex with your man, steal from you , or talk about you”*). The women believed that the mutual hate, distrust and disloyalty are unique to the black community (*“Black families have so much hatred, we don’t have any unity, we are the only community that don’t get along”*).

Fear of the consequences of disclosure. Fear of the consequences was expressed relative to disclosure to both informal and formal systems. The fear of disclosing to family and friends was associated with shame, hope and distrust. Disclosure to formal service providers was feared for the same reasons, but was also experienced as risking further retaliatory domestic violence, losing agency and facing undesired outcomes such as being reported to ACS.

In spite of the aforementioned barriers to disclosure, after attempting to address the problem on their own, most participants began to seek help. The turning point was typically after they *“lost all hope”* that the abuser will change, and *“got tired”*, *“had enough”*, *“was fed up”* with his behavior. This change usually occurred when the abuser did *“too much”*, or hurt the woman *“really bad”*. What constituted *“too much”* was different for each woman and did not necessarily involved physical violence. When they began seeking help participants turned to informal and formal networks, nevertheless, they continued to feel alone.

Feeling alone after disclosing the abuse. The feeling that they are alone in the world was reinforced after disclosing the abuse. Asking for help was a challenging task for the women. When they finally took this step they hoped to be listened to and understood but were disappointed by perceived insensitive, uncaring, indifferent, judgmental and often punitive response and reported feeling lonelier after disclosure to both informal and formal systems.

Feeling alone after disclosure to informal systems. When they decided to seek help most participants turned to family, usually their mother first. However they were disappointed with the response because their mother sided with the abuser and blamed them, told them to stay and take the abuse or did not seem to care. Several participants were church members and approached church leaders for help. While clergy provided instrumental assistance such as calling shelters on the woman's behalf or changing the locks on her door, participants felt that they fell short of meeting their emotional needs because they often referred them to church counselors for couple or family counseling, which was perceived as inappropriate and did not follow up or showed interest if the woman did not reach out to them which reinforced the feeling of abandonment.

Feeling alone after disclosure to formal services. In addition to disclosing the abuse to family members and church leaders most women turned to formal services and reported feeling that none of these services was giving them the emotional support they needed. Feeling abandoned and disappointed emerged relative to three groups of service providers: police officers, court officers and case workers.

Police officers often took long time to arrive, did not make efforts to find the abuser if he was out of the apartment by the time that they arrived, did not provide information about services, did not listen to the woman, did not seem to care, or threatened to arrest the woman or to report her to ACS if she called too many times.

Court officers were perceived as cold and indifferent. They asked the women to fill out forms but did not try to explain the process or to ease women's anxiety that was built up during the long hours of waiting to see a judge not knowing what was going to happen.

Caseworkers. In addition to the police and the courts, participants either turned to shelters or did not seek further help from formal services. Therefore shelter and public assistance caseworkers were their only potential source for professional support. However these caseworkers were perceived as insensitive, disrespectful, uncaring, "numb" "only care about their paycheck", unable to understand women's pain, and treated the woman as if she was "just a number". Thus they were not seen as a source of support.

The third finding

The third finding was the duality in participants' self-perception of **feeling simultaneously unworthy and strong.**

Feeling unworthy. Participants reported feeling low and having low self-esteem. They believed that they developed low self-esteem as a result of lifelong exposure to intra-familial and extra-familial abuse, social marginalization and stigmatization. The intra-familial emotional abuse that participants viewed as contributing to their low self-esteem included: "not being loved", "not being wanted", being told that they were "ugly", "stupid", "unlovable", "no good". In the extra-familial environment they felt that because of their racial, class and gender affiliation they were not "heard", "did not have rights", were "looked down at" "disrespected", "laughed at", "faced bias" that made them feel "low" and "faced judgments" that made them "feel ashamed". Participants felt that all black women are prone to develop low self-esteem because they are unable to

measure up to mainstream standards of feminine beauty and worth because “*what you see as beauty ideals on TV are always white blond women... black women can’t look like that so they are insecure. If you are black, especially if your skin is darker you will have low self-esteem*”. The women believed that low self-esteem contributed to their susceptibility to domestic violence, because viewing themselves as not worthy of any better they stayed in the abusive relationship for as long as they did.

Feeling Strong. Concurrent with feeling low and unworthy, the women perceived themselves as strong and resilient. While they attributed their low self-esteem to the doing of others who abused them, stigmatized and marginalized them, they perceived their strength as manifested in their own ability to cope with the abuse. They felt that they were strong because of two reasons, their ability to endure and survive the abuse, and their ability to fight back and maintain self agency in the face of constant victimization by a hostile world (“*I go home and I cry, I cry all night and I get up in the morning ready to kick the world’s butt*”). The inner strengths that helped them to cope with the hardship and fight alone to survive and resist the abuse, were attributed by the women to a combination of three sources, spiritual faith in God that was perceived as a source of comfort and hope, motherhood that gave them a sense of purpose, esteem, efficacy and belonging, and a sense of meaning that “*everything happens for a reason*”, and there is a meaning for all the pain that they have endured. For most participants the meaning was the hope that they will be able to use their painful experience to help others in similar situations.

Feminist Standpoints theory is useful in explaining all three findings of the sense that they are being constantly abused by the immediate and extended social environment which characterizes the lived experience of participants, the intense feelings of loneliness that constitute their emotional world and the duality in their self-perception.

The first finding can be explained by the interlocking structure of class race and gender oppressions, which through mechanisms of social marginalization, discrimination and stigmatization create the conditions that facilitated participants’ exposure to abuse on all three levels of the matrix of domination, i.e. the individual level of personal biography, the community level and the level of social institutions. In addition to being facilitated by the interlocking axes of class, race and gender oppressions, the experiences of abuse by the family, community and social institutions were themselves interrelated and exacerbated each other. Thus in a circular process, the intersecting dynamics among class, race and gender created risk factors for abuse on all levels and the experience of abuse on each of these levels led to further abuse on the other levels, which then amplified the impact of class, race and gender oppressions as well as magnified their mutual oppressive effects.

Relative to class, participants identified poverty as one of the main social determinates which directly shaped their entrapment in a circle of abuse. However, poverty is systematically structured along gender and racial lines, with women, due to labor market gender discrimination, being poorer than men, blacks, due to racial discrimination, being poorer than whites, and black women, who face both gender and racial discrimination, positioned, along with their children, at the highest poverty rate, and due to residential segregation, are also the most likely to reside in neighborhoods with high poverty concentration, fewer employment opportunities, poor quality schools

and fewer resources (McLanahan & Kelly, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). This proposition suggests that their innate social identity as black females placed participants at the highest risk to experience both family and community poverty. Being poor black and females participants possessed all the major risk factors to abuse on all three levels of the matrix of domination. The key risk factors for experiencing child maltreatment and witnessing domestic violence are being poor, residing in poor neighborhood and living with a single parent with a partner in the household (Drake & Rank, 2009; Sedlak, McPherson & Das, 2010). Thus, growing up in poor single mother families who resided in poor minority inner city communities, participants' personal biography began with the experience of child maltreatment. In addition to being a consequence of family and community poverty, experiencing childhood maltreatment often leads to further poverty in adulthood (Zielinski, 2009). Poverty, young age, residence in urban impoverished communities and a history of child abuse were identified as the major risk factors for domestic violence (Richie, 1996; West, 2005). Possessing all these risk factors, participants' personal biography continued with the experience of domestic violence in adulthood. Similar to childhood maltreatment, circular relationship exists between domestic violence and poverty (Tolman & Rosen, 2000). While poverty played a role in their victimization, the experience of domestic violence often resulted in worse poverty because for most participants leaving the abuser meant losing his financial support and becoming homeless. The poverty in turn led to further abuse and so on.

Participants' perception of their informal community, the second level of the matrix of domination, as an additional source of violence and abuse is consistent with previous research which has shown that black women who reside in inner city neighborhoods are exposed to high rates of violent crimes in their communities (West, 2002). The violence in these communities has been attributed to racial, social and economic isolation that have led to persistent concentrated poverty, chronic unemployment, resource deprivation, housing and population density and family disruption (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). In agreement with previous studies (Drake & Rank, 2009; West, 2002), participants felt that to survive in their violent communities they had to either isolate themselves or become aggressive to protect themselves. Both strategies in turn increased their risk for further abuse on all three levels of the matrix of domination.

The experience of domestic violence in the context of personal, family and community poverty forced participants to seek help from social services, making social institutions, the third level of domination, an additional source of abuse. The perceived bias, negative judgments, disrespect, disregard, threatening and oppressive treatment that they encountered in their interaction with service providers may have been shaped by racial- gender stereotypes which portray black women as strong but aggressive, impulsive and morally inferior, thus less deserving of protection and empathy but rather need to be controlled and contained (Richie, 2005; Shelby, 2002). The oppressive treatment of service providers reflected and reinforced the women's subordinated social position and amplified their experience of race class and gender oppressions. This often resulted in increased risk for severe domestic violence, because initial negative response of service providers discouraged the women from seeking further help, feeling that they rather cope with the abuse at home than expose themselves to abusive social institutions.

Furthermore, service providers often disempowered participants making them feel weaker and more vulnerable than they felt before.

The systematic operation of power on all social levels created a web of interrelated circular relationships among various levels of abuse that formed a “cage” like trap (Frye, 1983). Within this trap every attempt to escape one source of abuse exposed the women to another, sometimes worse abuse.

The second main finding was the intense loneliness that marked the women’s emotional world both before and after disclosing the abuse. Loneliness, particularly before disclosing the abuse is one of the psychological consequences of domestic violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler & Sandin, 1997). However, black battered women have been documented as feeling more isolated and tend to delay disclosure longer than their white counterparts because they face additional barriers to disclosure which are shaped by the intersection of race, class and gender oppressions, such as greater shame and distrust of service providers (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Richie, 1996, 2005).

In agreement with previous research the women in this study delayed disclosure until the abuse became very severe. There are four possible complementary explanations for this delay. First, internalized racial-gender stereotypes, which portray black women as strong but stigmatize them as inferior, controlling, angry aggressive and sexually promiscuous, may amplify their shame and increase their need to conceal the abuse to avoid the additional label of battered women who are stigmatized as weak and helpless (West, 1999). Second, feeling socially marginalized and stigmatized because of their race, class and gender, poor black women may conceal the abuse and stay in the relationship longer because they want to fit in and gain respect by conforming to dominant culture image which portray a worthy woman as one who is in stable heterosexual relationship (Richie, 1995). Third, distrust of formal service providers because of fear to encounter racism may delay disclosure (Nash, 2005). Fourth, distrust of informal networks, which contrary to expectations, was expressed by the women in this study and identified as the primary cause of their emotional isolation.

There may be several interrelated explanations to the distrust of the informal community. First, economic deprivation, which resulted from shifting to postindustrial economy and globalization compound by racial discrimination and stigmatization, and led to competition over scarce resources, break down of families, weakening of informal networks of support and social ties (Halpern, 1995; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Sokolff & Pratt, 2005; Wilson 1987). These created feelings of anger, frustration and despair among community members, which due to internalized oppression are directed at each other instead of at the real source of their suffering (Hill-Collins, 2000). Second, racist ideology, which has devalued traditional black culture as well as the intelligence, physical beauty and moral characteristic of black people and may have led to cultural alienation and inferiority feelings (Shelby, 2002), which in turn intensified the competition, jealousy and schadenfreude reported by the women. Third, The economic and social deterioration of black inner city communities, the violence, crime and harsh treatment of these communities by the police resulted in homicide and incarceration of many black men leading to the perception of a black man as “endangered species” (Bell & Mathis, 2000), often causing black women, to compete over men, in particular because they value heterosexual relationship and view it as a means to gain status, respect and

sense of esteem. Thus instead of viewing other women as a potential source of support participants emphasized that they did not trust other women and perceived them as a threat to their intimate relationships and therefore also to their social status and sense of esteem.

That Disclosure of the abuse when it finally occurred, did not ease the loneliness may also be explained by the impact of the interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppressions, which facilitated the unsupportive response of both informal and formal networks. As a result of the breakdown of inner city black families and communities, participants' family members who struggled with their own problems such as poverty, substance addiction and domestic violence, tended to accept violence as a normative behavior (Oliver, 1989), and were unavailable to provide emotional support. Formal services, which were utilized as a last resort, further reinforced the women's feeling that no one cared about them, due to their oppressive punitive policies and practices, which were shaped by the same systems of oppression.

The third finding of the duality in the women's self-perception offers a new insight into the women's inner experience and may explain their coping strategies. Previous studies of Caucasian battered women have indicated that their inner experience was characterized by a duality of feeling both strong, self-agents who make choices under adverse circumstances and weak helpless victims who are controlled by abusive men (Buchbinder, 2000; Kacen, 2002). The women in the current study presented a different nuance of a complex duality. Rather than feeling both strong and weak, they perceived themselves as strong but unworthy. They viewed their low self-esteem as vulnerability but not as an indication of weakness, and attributed it to their social position. They believed that their social identity as poor black women placed them at a disadvantage position that led to lifelong constant abuse by all social systems. However, although they were aware of dominant culture portrayal of battered women as weak and helpless, they refused to perceive themselves or be perceived by others as weak and helpless. They thought of themselves, in spite of their externally imposed vulnerability, as strong lonely warriors who kept fighting to survive in a hostile world. An examination of their fight suggests that they were fighting to protect their psychological survival. The women experience all the various types of abuse by all social systems as attacks on their sense of esteem and personal agency and were fighting to defend their sense of self against perceived constant assaults by others. They continued to do so even at the cost of exposing themselves to further victimization. Thus in a paradoxical way, the same strengths that helped them sustain their sense of self and survive and resist constant oppression, were also a weakness, because their persistent efforts to protect their sense of self and their refusal to surrender their self agency often contributed to their loneliness and to their entrapment in a circle of abuse, which in turn reinforced their perceived strengths.

While all findings can be explained by feminist standpoint theory, social cognitive theory which identifies the process through which participants constructed their sense of self in the context of social marginalization, multiple stigmatizations and constant abuse, can further help explain the third finding. According to social cognitive theory, people construct their sense of self through social interaction (Pervin & John, 1999). The general sense of self is constituted of two related but different dimensions of self-perception,

which are developed through two distinguished processes: self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Self-esteem is a judgment of self-worth, which develops through reflective appraisal and social comparison (Coopersmith, 1976). Self efficacy is a perception of one's own capability, which is a differentiated set of self beliefs linked to distinct realms of functioning and reflects an individual's competency that may result from undertaking challenges and overcoming them (Bandura, 1982). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy belief plays a key role in stress reaction and the quality of coping with threatening situations. Based on their own experiences and their observations of others' experiences people make cognitive appraisal of their abilities to cope with different type of situations. When faced with a threatening situation, people who have high self efficacy belief regarding their ability to cope with the threat tend to have a stronger sense of self agency, lower anxiety, weakened stress reaction and faster recovery from the trauma.

The self-perception of the participants supports social cognitive theory's notion about the structure and development of the sense of self. Both their low self-esteem and perceived strength were developed through interaction with hostile social environment. Through the process of reflective appraisal their marginalized social status, exposure to constant abuse and multiple stigmas led them to internalize others' negative judgments of them. Through social comparison they came to realize at a young age, that because of their race and class they do not possess the required characteristics to meet mainstream standards of women's beauty and worth. In lieu of protective factors these combined processes resulted in their low self-esteem. Their perceived strengths reflect high self efficacy belief in their ability to survive adversity, which was developed through the process of coping alone with the challenges of living in a hostile, constantly abusive social environment. Thus, the interlocking systems of race class and gender oppressions, which facilitated both participants' exposure to abuse on all social levels and their loneliness, also shaped their sense of self.

The self-construct of the women may explain their coping with domestic violence. That high self efficacy belief in one's ability to cope with threats can decrease anxiety and autonomic stress arousal (Bandura, 1988), may explain the women's report that they experienced fear only during the most severe violent incidents and their being less worried about themselves than their children in relation to community violence because they felt that they knew how to judge situations and respond to the threats whereas the children were perceived as less capable of assessing and reacting to risks.

In addition to decreasing anxiety, high self efficacy belief in the ability to cope with threats also increases self agency (Bandura, 1989), which may explain the strategies that the women used to resist intra-familial and extra-familial abuse. Both their active resistance such as fighting and arguing and the more passive reactions such as avoidance, reflect self agency in that they were intentional efforts designed to serve the women's purpose (Hann & De Bruin, 2010). In agreement with previous research (Straus & Gelles, 1986), most participants reacted to violence incidents by fighting back against the abuser. The strategy of fighting back is perceived in the domestic violence literature as a strategy of self-defense which is intended to avoid physical injury (Wyckoff & Simpson, 2008). Yet it usually results in severe injury to the woman (Backman & Carmody, 1994). The use of this presumably self defeating strategy by black battered women was

attributed to their socialization to be strong and self-reliant at all times and to internalized racial-racial stereotypes which portray black women as strong and compel them to try to defend themselves by fighting back (Geller, Miller & Churchill, 2006). The finding of the current study suggests that the women fought back in self-defense. However they did not try to protect their body from physical injury. They were trying to protect their sense of self, particularly their sense of agency and self-esteem. The data indicated that the women could not tolerate feeling helpless or being perceived by others as such. This was partially motivated by the need to protect their fragile sense of self-esteem by living up to the stereotype of the strong, self-reliant woman who can fight for herself, but was mostly the result of earlier traumas. Because the experience of maltreated children is characterized by feelings of overwhelming helplessness and lack of control (Ferderico, Jackson & Black, 2008), it was intolerable for the women to be in a similar helpless position again, and when the abuser hit them or was perceived as about to do so they had to regain a sense of agency by fighting back at any cost. Their high self efficacy belief in their ability to fight and to withstand the physical injury, coupled with low self efficacy belief in their ability to generate other effective measures which would produce a desirable effect, motivated them to fight and exercise some control over the situation, and protect their sense of self from the debilitating affect of feeling completely powerless.

In situations of very severe violence or when they were pregnant and perceived themselves as unable to exercise any control, their anxiety level increased and they experienced physiological arousal such as shaking and trembling as well as psychological reactions of dissociation. Thus, in agreement with previous studies, which documented the role of high self efficacy in reaction to trauma (Bandura, 1997), in spite of the greater physical pain that was inflicted on them because they fought back, the women's high self efficacy belief which enabled them to respond actively by fighting back and maintain a sense of agency, protected them from experiencing severe traumatic reactions in most incidents of domestic violence.

The use of more passive resistance in different contexts, such as concealing the abuse or avoiding sharing their experience in support group meetings, was driven by the same motivation to defend their frail sense of esteem and self agency. In these instances the women did not use active aggressive measures, either because the threat to their self-esteem and agency was perceived lesser, because they had other available options, or because they feared the potential consequences of using active resistance, which reflect their self agency and support social cognitive theory view of people acting as cognitive agents who make decisions based on appraisal of the situation, their ability to cope with it and the anticipated outcomes of their actions (Bandura, 1997).

While the women's coping strategies were crucial to sustain their general sense of self, they also had negative outcomes. The active resistance was often directly related to further abuse, and the passive resistance contributed to their loneliness and emotional isolation which in turn increased the risk of abuse. However, their self construct which was shaped through interactions with a constantly abusive, marginalized and stigmatizing environment resulted in a desperate need to protect their self-esteem and sense of agency and their ability to do it at the price of loneliness and often further abuse. Thus, by facilitating participants' social environment, the interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression shaped the women emotional experience and self construct as well,

creating a trap, which was both external and internal. Yet, in spite being victimized and trapped, the women did not project hopelessness or despair. Rather, their creativity, insightful reality perception, self-efficacy and spiritual belief, as well as their dream to create a better reality for their children helped them to perceive their lives as a story of perseverance and hope.

Utility for Social Work Practice

The findings of this study have implications for social policy and social work practice. The recognition that structured socio political systems shape every aspect of poor black battered women's external and internal realities suggests the need for macro level changes to increase social and economic equality, which is expected to decrease the prevalence of domestic violence in minority communities. In order to promote such changes social workers may collaborate with leaders and members of minority communities, local religious congregations and professional community organizers and engage in a mutual effort of community building (Siriani & Friedland, 2001) as well as a collective struggle against inequality. Such collective activism may improve the social and economic conditions of minority communities and is likely to enhance a sense of agency and esteem, promote group solidarity, mutual trust and community cohesion. These may help to decrease community and family violence and afford members a form of collective self-defense against oppression (Shelby, 2002).

In addition to social reforms to address the structural underpinnings of domestic violence, there is a need to expand and improve existing services for battered women and their children. Such changes may include opening additional domestic violence shelters to accommodate all the women who are seeking refuge, establishing clear state guidelines that require shelters to include initial danger assessment in their screening process and prioritize admission for survivors who are at imminent danger (Campble, Webster & Glass, 2009), in order to prevent situations in which women at high risk are denied the protection of a shelter due to lack of space.

In order to allow victims the time to attend to their children and process the trauma that they have endured, there is a need to ease the pressure that may result from the need to secure permanent housing in a period of ninety days and reduce the burden of having to attend numerous, mandated welfare and housing programs. These will require the development of safe transitional housing, or at minimum extending the maximum stay in domestic violence shelters beyond ninety days for women who need more time to adjust to their new situation, reflect on their experiences and prepare for the future. Public assistance procedures and eligibility requirements may also be simplified for victims of domestic violence to allow more time and energy for psychological healing.

There is also a need to provide ongoing education and training to police officers, court personnel, welfare case workers, religious clergy and health care providers about the unique realities, difficulties and needs of minority battered women. Such training may lead to a more sensitive and effective response of service providers to the needs and request for help from this population.

In addition to macro policy changes, the findings offer seven implications for social work practice with black battered women as well. Five implications may address changes at the agency level. First, the finding that women felt that they were systematically oppressed by shelters suggests a need for shelters to examine their policies and practices, to identify oppressive rules and consider modifying them to be more “user friendly”, such as changing the status of some programs from mandated to voluntary, and redefining inspection visits as home visits which are conducted at a predictable schedule at the woman’s presence and are designed to convey care and support to the woman rather than inspect her apartment.

Second, adding to the belief in the superiority of “expert” knowledge and a “one size fits all” solutions, respect for women’s knowledge and individual needs, is important. It can be achieved by viewing women as partners, and including their input in the design and implementation of agency policy by structuring opportunities for their participation in agency board of directors, advisory committees and work groups (LeRoux, 2009). This may empower the women and enhance the effectiveness of agency practices (Callahan, 2007)

Third, adding more treatment modalities to better serve the needs of all women may be helpful. For example, support groups, which focus on understanding the dynamics of domestic violence and encourage women to share their personal abuse related experience, have been considered the preferred treatment for battered women (Tutty, Bidggod & Rothery, 1993). However the findings of this study suggest that such groups may not be effective for black battered women. The unique combination of their low self-esteem coupled with the need to appear strong and their distrust of other women, make the need to share painful personal abuse related experience and expose their vulnerability in a peer group uncomfortable and threatening to the women. Expanding the variety of available treatment methods to include individual and family counseling, explaining the potential advantages and limitations of each treatment modality, and allowing the woman to choose which format she preferred is expected to increase a sense of control, decrease anxiety and improve the perceived effectiveness of treatment.

Support groups can still be offered on a voluntary basis. However their structure and content may be adjusted to accommodate the needs of poor black women. Women may be allowed more freedom to determine the goals and agenda of group meetings. The understanding that gender inequality and domestic violence are not the only forms of violence and oppression that the women experience, may suggest a need to consider with the women the possibility of addressing issues of racism in group meetings. It is possible that discussing common issues that are less associated with personal failure, may promote solidarity, trust and mutual support among the women. Additional option, given the importance of spirituality in black women’s lives, may be to consider offering spiritual healing, meditation sessions and interfaith prayer groups, which may be facilitated by local religious leaders or interfaith ministers (Gullum, 2008).

Fourth, creating supportive environment, individual and group supervision and ongoing training for staff is likely to assist workers in coping with issues related to vicarious trauma, deepen their understanding of the unique realities of battered women from diverse backgrounds, enhance cultural competence and sensitivity and improve their ability to respond more effectively to women’s needs. In order to address these goals ,

training may include empathetic skill building as well as education about the dynamics and consequences of domestic violence, the nature and impact of trauma, the impact of racism and other sources of oppression on women's lives and the interventions that have been developed to address these conditions. Such education may incorporate experiential learning methods, mindfulness exercise, simulations and psychodrama which are likely to provide opportunities for workers to develop self-awareness of their own feelings, values and bias, and practice affect sharing, reflecting listening, emotion regulation, communication skills, problem solving and conscious decision making (Mulins, 2011). These may decrease or delay workers' burn out and enhance their ability to convey empathy and offer emotional support to the women.

Finally, understanding that broader social conditions and macro level social policies shape minority women's susceptibility to domestic violence and the solutions that are available to them, and given that the women indicated that a sense of purpose and the hope of being able to help other women played a role in their resiliency, suggest that agency may train workers and interested women to collaboratively engage in advocacy and activism to promote equality and the development of effective response to domestic violence. This may empower, both the women and the workers, foster trust and mutual respect and may promote needed social change.

These changes at the agency level are required in order to facilitate the conditions for workers to modify their practice in order to better address the women's needs. Recognition of the women's profound loneliness and their struggle to sustain their sense of self for the sake of psychological survival, indicate that workers should place greater emphasis on meeting the women's emotional needs, particularly their needs for connection and emotional joining (Jordan, 1997). Improvement can be made by following the principles of the client-centered approach (Rogers, 1966). Taking the time to listen to the woman, conveying respect, genuine care, positive regard and empathy may ease feeling of loneliness and create safe emotional environment for women to process their experience and begin the process of healing. Awareness of the women's frail self-esteem and their need to maintain a sense of agency suggests that workers should focus on working from a strength perspective (Saleebey, 1996). Viewing women as equal partners in a collaborative process of mutual exploration of needs, resources and constraints; respecting the woman's expertise on her own situation; encouraging her to define her own aspirations, goals and priorities and working **with** her to develop a plan to achieve her goals; respecting the woman's privacy by securing confidentiality; expressing appreciation for the woman's coping skills and reinforcing her "survivor's pride" (Benard, 2004), and addressing broader social issues of race, class and gender oppressions as they pertain to the woman's situation, may help to empower women, reinforce their sense of self agency and enhance their self-esteem.

Figure 1: The Relationships between Social Identity, Experience of Abuse, Emotional World and Self Perception of Poor Black Battered Women

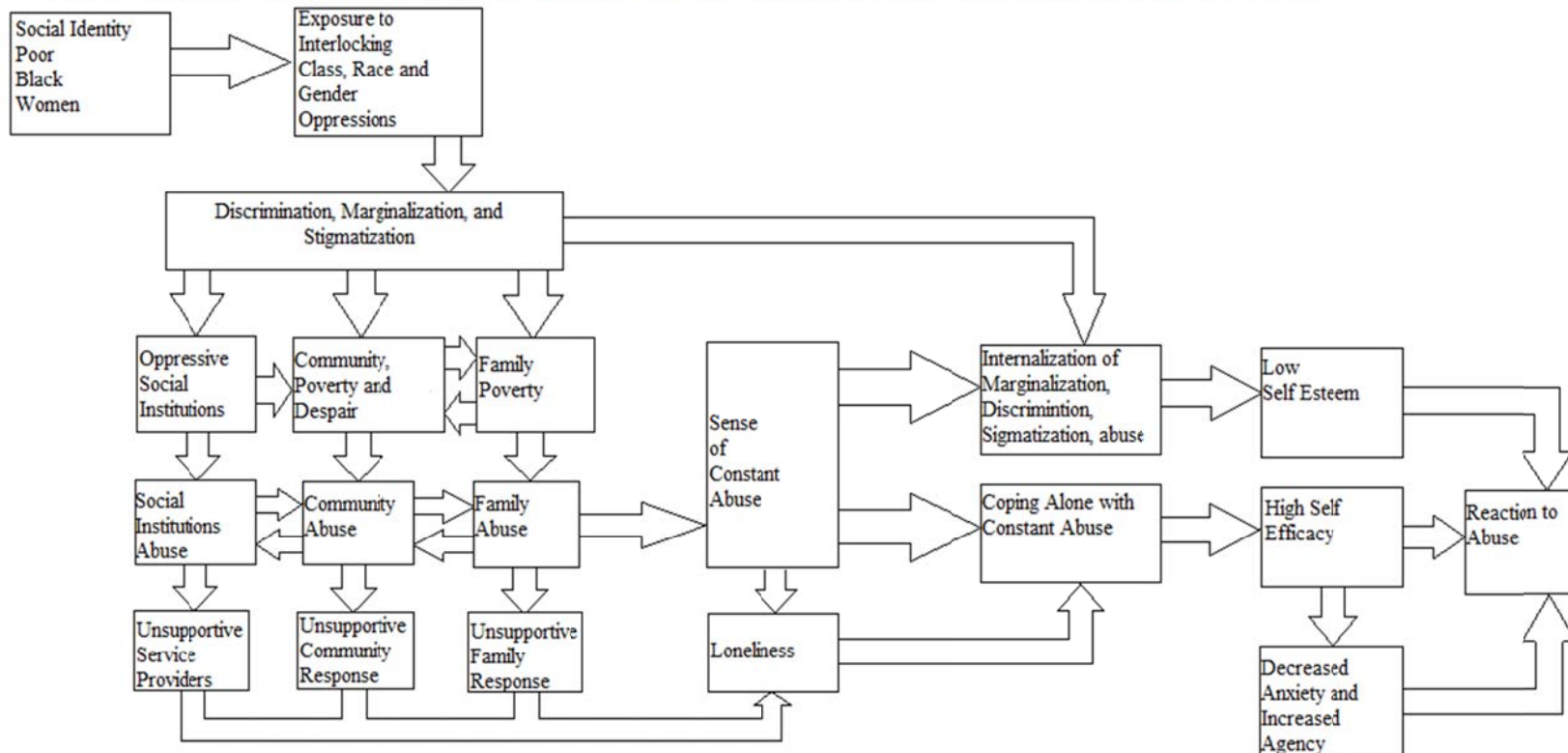


Figure 1: As indicated in Figure 1, the women's social identity as poor black women exposed them to the impact of the interlocking systems of class, race and gender oppressions. Through mechanisms of discrimination and stigmatization these systems created the conditions that shaped the women's experience of constant abuse. The same mechanisms facilitated the unsupportive response of family, community and social service providers to the women when they asked for help. The experience of constant abuse and lack of social support resulted in feelings of loneliness. Internalization of discrimination, stigmatization and abuse led to low self esteem. The experience of coping alone with constant abuse resulted in high coping efficacy which decreased their anxiety and increased sense of agency. Their low self esteem, high self efficacy, low anxiety, and sense of agency facilitated their reaction to the abuse.

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